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Symbolic Interactionism in Sociology of Education Textbooks in Mainland China: Coverage, Perspective and Implications

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Abstract

17 textbooks are examined for the quantity and quality of their material pertaining to ideas in the symbolic interaction tradition. Most of the textbooks fail to discuss at least some of the ideas in this tradition. In the 5 exceptions, the texts only include material from the Chicago school of this tradition with only a little inclusive information from the Iowa school. Thus, the ideas about symbolic interaction that students receive from these texts are both incomplete and outdated. Based on the text-analysis, this paper claims that the materials from only one of these schools greatly diminish opportunities to use imformation from the other one to help students gain a sociological, dialectical, and reflexive perspective.

Keywords: Symbolic interactionism, Sociology of education textbooks, Mainland China

1. Introduction

Most of the theoretical traditions and analytical perspectives that college students first acquire about any discipline are likely from the introductory course or textbook on that subject. Introductory textbooks are like guides that leading novice learners to go through the terminological jungle where many labels and schools compete. Meanwhile, excellent textbooks will not only influence students' view on the certain discipline but also shape their future actions as researchers in the specific field, as community members or as participants in the larger society.

Sociology of education, as an independent subject in mainland China, has three main developmental stages since the first textbook *Education and Society*, written by Tao Menghe (1922), was published: (1) the foundation period (1922-1949); (2) the stagnation period (1949-1979) and; (3) recovery and reconstruction period (1979-)(Dong & Zhang, 2007). Given this context, this paper examines a group of textbooks designed for introductory classes in Sociology of Education and evaluates their treatment of symbolic interactionism. During the analysis, several facets are examined including that the way this theory is discussed and the extent to which its developments in the theory are noted and employed in discussions on substantive material.

2. A Historical Review on Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is arguably one of the primary theoretical traditions in the discipline of sociology (Collins, 1994). According to the interactionists, the fundamention of symbolic interactionism is the manner in which the individual is connected to the social structure and the possible interplay between the individual and others. The interactionist perspective maintains that human beings engage in social action on the basis of meanings acquired from social sources, including their own experience. These meanings are both learned from others and to some extent shaped or reshaped by those using the symbols. As humans learn and use symbols and develop meanings for objects in their social contexts, they develop a "mind" that is both reflecting and relexive. Mind is not a structure but a process that emerges from humans' efforts to adjust to their environment (Turner,2004:345). Sociologists who identify themselves as interactionist would agree that the central figure in this tradition is George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), who made the great breakthrough in understanding the basic properties of human social interaction. A crucial concept of Mead is the self. The self and the mind are dialectically related to one another, neither can exist without the other. Thus, one cannot take oneself as an object (think about oneself) without a mind, and one cannot have a mind, have a conversation with oneself, without a self (Ritzer, 2004:56). Basic to the self is reflexivity, or the ability to put ourselves in others' places, humans are both actors and reactors and the human sense of "self" is a product and process, as the self is simultaneously shaped by the larger society.

In addition to providing discussions of many elements about the relationship between the society and the individual, Mead articulates the origins and actions of the self. He argues that the self is comprised of two componets which allow for both dialectical and reflexive processes. According to Mead (2005), the part of the self that takes the attitudes of others is termed the "me". However, we can never predict exactly how their responses may play out. We have a general feel for the way in which interactions take place. Yet, it remains possible for someone to react in an unexpected manner.

This reaction to a stimuli arising during interaction is the "I" and is made possible because of the "me" (Taylor, 1997). As Ritzer's (2004:59) statement, "we are never totally aware of the I, with the result that we sometimes surprise ourselves with our actions."

Given Mead's dichotomous approach to the architecture of the self, it is not surprising that two rather distinct views of symbolic interactionism have developed over the past decades: one emphasizes aspects and consequences of the "I", the other emphasizes aspects and consequences of the "me". These two views of symbolic interactionism are often referred to, respectively, as the Chiago school and the Iowa school of symbolic interaction theory.

2.1 The Chicago School

The central figure and major exponent of Chicago school is Herbert Blumer(1900-1987), who coined the label "symbolic interaction". According to Collins, in Blumer's hands, symbolic interactionism turned into a full-fledged dynamic sociology (Yu, 2002:159).

In his writings, Blumer championed a position and a methodology that emphasized the processes associated with the Meadian "I" (Blumer, 1969). In his view, Mead's picture of the human being as an actor differs radically from the conception of man that dominates current psychological and social science. Mead simply meant that the human being is an object to himself. The human being may perceive himself, have conceptions of himself, communicate with himself, and act toward himself (Blumer, 1966). Meanwhile, such self-interaction takes the form of making indications to himself and meeting these indications by making further indications.

As mentioned, Blumer and his followers pay special attention to how humans interpret and define actions of their own and others. The focus of Chicago school interaction theory is on the reflecting, creative, acting self, which is constantly apprehending meaning for objects in the environment while simultaneously altering those meanings in service of larger issues of the self (Blumer, 1969). For Blumer, it is not possible to study the structure of a society through the use of variables because this would imply a relationship of causation, which would be impossible since anything is capable of being instantly redefined. Therefore, fixed social variables are impossible to measure, and any attempts to explain human social behavior with such constructions are unproductive. In addition, Gusfield (2003) tackles characters of symbolic interactionism and presents his understandings which are most valuable guidelines:

Whatever SI may be to my readers, for me it was not and is not today a theory in the sense of a body of thought providing substantive generalizations or abstracted propositions about some social activity. There are no substantive predictions or explanations to which it confidently leads. In fact, … "The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism"(1969), Blumer refers to SI as an choose to call it a "perspective" or a "way of seeing," both terms central to the writings of another and major influence on me, Kenneth Burke. Four aspects of this symbolic interactionist "way of seeing" seem significant in my thinking and in my work: meaning; interaction, emergence, and situatedness; language and symbolism; and the humanistic thrust. (Gusfield, 2003)

In sum, Blumer and those who follow in his disciplinary footsteps are primarily attuned to the actions and consequences of Mead's "I". Throughout the development of the discipline of sociology, the Chicago school has dominated the analysis and understanding on interactionist theory by most sociologists. Yet developing parallel to this view was another version of the theory, the Iowa school which placed more emphasis on the ways in which features of the social structure influence and shape common meanings.

2.2 The Iowa School

The most influential advocate of the Iowa school of symbolic interaction is Manford Kuhn (1911-1963), who studied with Kimball Young in the Universtity of Wisconsin and was on the faculty of the University of Iowa from 1946 to 1963. Unlike other interactionists, especially Blumer, Kuhn focuses on the processes associated with Mead's "me" and incorporates role theory (Stryker and Statham, 1985). He points out "ambiguities and contradictions" in the work of Mead while he sharply criticized other interactionists for interpreting then as "dark, inscrutable complexities too difficult to understand"(Kuhn, 1964a).

Kuhn and his students put Mead's concept of the self at the cornerstone of their approach to understand human behavior. They saw the social object self as firmly lodged in an actor's social group memberships and activities, and thus as stable as these memberships and activities. Furthermore, consistent with Mead, they saw the self as an object present in all social activity. They were guided by the belief that if the structure of selves could be understood, it would aid in the development of a general theory of social behavior. (Buban, 1986:27)

The Iowa school has been subjected to severe criticism from other interactionists. In particular, Kuhn was accused of grossly distorting Mead's position by conceptualizing the self as a permanent, imprinted structure that determines behavior. This notion is exposed in the chief research tool developed by Kuhn and his colleagues, which is a pencil-and-paper measure of self-attitudes known as the Twenty Statements Test (TST) (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954).

While it is true that the employment of the TST explicitly treats the self as a structure, a perusal of Kuhn's work reveals

that he was well aware of the fact that as social situations change, persons' self attitudes also change (Kuhn, 1964b). According to this apparent contradiction, Kuhn was simply reacting to a belief that other interactionists, Blumer in particular, had distorted the concept self by conceptualizing it as overly fluid, as totally lacking any order or structure:

Some theorists … discuss self-change as if it were most volatile and evanescent; the self shifts with each new indiction one makes to himself, and these indications are the constant accompaniments of experience. (Kuhn, 1964a: 61)

Another criticism of the Iowa school is that they, in employing a pencil-and-paper measure of the self, ignored the most basic feature of human social behavior: temporal process. However, Kuhn was deeply frustrated with the general lack of advancement by symbolic interactionists toward developing a theory of social conduct. His impatience with other interactionists, especially those of the Chicago school, can be clearly observed in his classic review of the field (Kuhn, 1964a). However, for the study of interaction processes, it must be concluded that the TST research inspired by Kuhn is of virtually no value. Even though critics of the Iowa school (Meltzer et al., 1975) have made several misleading inferences regarding both Kuhn's interpretation of Mead and Kuhn's philosophical stance, they are quite correct in charging him with ignoring process in his research endeavors. Nevertheless, the contribution of Kuhn's legacy must not be underestimated.

To sum up, Kuhn and those who follow in his disciplinary footsteps are primarily attuned to the actions and consequences of Mead's "me". Several decades later, building on the legacy of the "old" Iowa tradition, the "new" Iowa school places great emphasis on the order or structure of human interaction, which are influenced by Kuhn apparently. Also evident is Kuhn's insistence that a theory of social life can only be built upon a solid foundation of data which has been collected in a controlled, systematic fashion.

Accordingly, the Chicago school and Iowa school are different but related threads in the history of symbolic interactionism. With the above historical review as background, this paper focuses on two questions below:

a). To what extent and in what manner is the symbolic interaction tradition covered in Sociology of Education textbooks in mainland China?

b). If there are some relevant discussions in the textbooks, which theorists' and researchers' works from the symbolic interactionist tradition are presented?

3. Methods

Given the above framework, this paper performed a content analysis of 17 textbooks which are published after 1979 (the period of recovery and reconstruction) and the authors are Chinese scholars in mainland China. Table 1 shows the details about these textbooks including author's name, text name, publication location, and publication time.

Once the sample of texts was gatherd, the desired data was collected by a systematic review of the presentation of material on symbolic interactionism in each text. Using classical works on symbolic interaction theory (Mead, 2005; Blumer, 1969;Goffman, 1989) and several introductory textbooks on sociology (Turner, 2004; Rizter,2004; Popenoe,1999) as references, major concepts and terms are selected to identify whether symbolic interactionism is mentioned and introduced in these textbooks. The results of this selecting process are the following concepts: "symbolic interaction (interactionism)", "interactionist theory", "social interaction", "self", "self-concept", "generalized other", "important other", "identity",and "role-identity". The subject indexes of all books were consulted for entries on these terms. Each of these terms is highly likely to be related to symbolic interactionist theory in general and is an obvious and important aspect of either the Chicago or the Iowa school of symbolic interaction theory or both. Additionally, this method also provides a mechanism for evaluating whether or not a particular school is being favored in the introductory text. As a final check for a discussion of symbolic interactionist material, the chapters in which symbolic interacionist information is traditionally found in introductory texts had been examined. (See Table 1)

4. Findings

Table 2 summarizes the data on how information on symbolic interaction theory is presented in the 17 general introductory textbooks on sociology of education examined for this study. The first column lists the textbook under consideration by authors' names.

Continuing with Table 1, the second column of data is labeled "Is symbolic interaction covered?"and reports on whether information on symbolic interactionism is contained in each text. If symbolic interactionism information is included in any way in the text the cell is coded as "yes"; if no information on symbolic interaction is included, the cell is coded as "no".

The third column reports whether or not material produced by writers from the Chicago school of symbolic interaction is included in the text. If such information is included in any way in the text, the cell is coded as "yes"; if not, the cell is coded as "no".

The fourth column contains a list of symbolic interactionist theorists and researchers generally associated with the

Chicago school of symbolic interactionism whose work is cited in each text. If such information is not included in any way in the text, the cell is coded as "none".

The fifth column indicateds whether or not information from the Iowa school is included in each text. As with column three, cells show either a "yes" if the text includes material from this tradition or a "no" if there is no inclusion of material from the Iowa school. The final column lists theorists and researchers working within the Iowa school of symbolic interaction whose works are cited in the texts, which is the same with column four. (See Table 2)

According to Table 2, an inspection will reveal that only 5 textbooks analyzed for this study discussed or mentioned symbolic interaction theory. As can be seen in column 4, Mead, Cooley, and blumer are cited more often in these discusstions. Meanwhile, several British theorists such as Hargreaves, Keddie, and Woods are also cited. The other 12 textbooks, however, discuss the problems and classical works without any remarks linking to either schools of symbolic interactionism. What is more, the Iowa school has been totally ignored by the authors since 1986.

In the 5 textbooks which includes symbolic interaction theory, some texts mention major exponents, but fail to review their works and theories (Lu, 1990; Wu, 1998; Xie,2007). Texts such as Qian's (2001) discuss both theories and methodologies of Chicago school, but, apparently, Iowa school is out of the author's vision for some reasons. Minhui Qian (2004) is the only author who has mentioned the initial development of symbolic interaction theory.

The data in Table 2 clearly indicate that the vast majority of introductory sociology of education textbooks allocate no space to the discussion and summary of symbolic interaction theory. Even though several textbooks address this theoretical tradition, symbolic interactioism is often refered as a sub-theoretical school accompanied with phenomenology and ethnomethodology in interpretive approach or the so-called new sociology, which has risen since 1970s. It is equally clear that most of the coverage of symbolic interaction theory is based on Chicago school, which is advocated by Blumer and his colleagues. Moreover, when the Iowa school is mentioned in the introductory texts (Qian, 2001), it is often done in an unclear and incomplete fashion.

According to the primary findings above, this research argues that the works fail to mention the symbolic interaction theory for two main reasons: firstly, the text is an edited collection of readings or the text approaches to the study of sociology of education from a highly macro perspective. In the former case, the text contains little or no discussion of any theoretical perspectives; in the latter, symbolic interaction theory, together with functionism and conflict theory, falls outside of the scope of the text and is ignored altogether. Secondly, during the three developmental periods of sociology of education in mainland China, most of the textbooks focus on structural-functionalism and conflict theory (Dong & Zhang, 2007) rather than interpretative approach in which symbolic interactionism is a critical figure. This traditon, to large extent, is due to the absence of sociology of education from 1949 to 1979 when the structural-functionalism as the mainstream in worldwide sociological research encounters the double challenges from conflict theory and interpretive sociology. In the first decade of recovery and reconstruction period, the main task facing by the reserachers in mainland China was restarting the research as soon as possible because this acdemic traditon had been suspended for almost 30 years. That is to say, reconstructing the system of this subject was more important than introducing western research paradigms or paying special attention to the new movements in the global academe.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

If it can be assumed that the material in introductory textbooks in any discipline should reflect the current state of that discipline, then the data presented above warrant the conclusion that most current introductory textbooks do not meet this criterion when discussing one of the major theoretical traditions of the symbolic interaction theory. With few exceptions, textbooks designed for novice learners majoring in Sociology of Education are silent on the substantial changes which have occurred in this aspect of the discipline over the past three decades in mainland China. From the perspectives of current teaching and learning situations in universities, there are a number of implications that should be noted.

Firstly, it is unfortunate that the majority of examined texts only aim at the introduction of structural-functionalism and conflict theory. No doubt that these two traditions are critically important in the history of sociology as well as in the development of Sociology of Education. Symbolic interactionism as a representative orientation in the interpretive sociology, however, is also a landmark in the sociological adventure. Ignoring this tradition does not only make the subject incomplete and outdated, but also make researchers lose an effective instrument to analyze the social world.

Secondly, by presenting the Chicago school as the symbolic interaction theory, students may easily reach the conclusion of what symbolic interaction is and how elements of the social structure might influence the construction and application of meanings for a situation. As many writers have noted, this might have been a current view in the discipline in the 1970s but is hardly the case today. Only discussing material from the Chicago school of symbolic interactionism leads to the conclusion that the primary micro-theory of the discipline fails to show how structural and interactional components help us understand a variety of topics in some specific fields.

Thirdly, in most texts reviewed for this research, symbolic interaction theory is presented as an opposing perspective to

the macro-level functionalist and conflict theories in sociology. The review of these theories is typically followed by remarks about the deficiencies of all three and some comments surrounding the debate over whether structure or agency is a more powerful social force. If text authors were to include information from both threads of symbolic interactionist theory, the authors could not only incorporate this debate into the discussion of the theories but also provide at least one way to help students think about the relative impact of agency and structure in their lives with appropriate, even autobiographical, examples.

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Table 1. Textbooks Examined

Text Author (s)	Text Name	Publication House	Time
Pei, Shiying	Introduction on Sociology of Education	Nankai University Press	1986
Gui, Wanhong & Su, Yulan	Sociology of Education	Tianjin People's Press	1987
Liu, Huizhen	Sociology of Education	Liaoning Education Press	1988
Li, Yixian & Bi, Cheng	An Introduction to Sociology of Education	Heilongjiang Education Press	1989
Lu, Jie (eds)	Sociology of Education	Peoples Education Press	1990
Dong, Zefang	Sociology of Education	Central China Normal University Press	1990
Wu, Duo & Zhang, Renjie	Education and Society	China Science and technology Publishing House	1991
Jin, Yiming (eds)	Sociology of Education	Jiangsu Education Press	1992
Fu, Songtao	New Discussion on Sociology of Education	Hebei University Press	1997
Wu, Kangning	Sociology of Education	Peoples Education Press	1998
Ma, Hemin & Gao, Xuping	The Studies on Sociology of Education	Shanghai Education Press	1998
Qian, Pu (eds)	Sociology of Education: Theory and Practice	Guangxi Education Press	2001
Ma, Hemin	Newly Organized on Sociology of Education	East China Normal University	2002
Qian, Minhui	Sociology of Education: Thinking and Construction of Modernity	Peking University Press	2004
Yang, Changyong & Zheng, Huai	Sociology of Education	Guangdong Peoples Publishing House	2005
Hu ,Chunming	Sociology of Education	China Social Sciences Press	2006
Xie, Weihe	The Sociological Analysis of Educational Activeities	Education Science Publishing House	2007

Table 2. Coverage in the Texts

Text Author (s)	Is symbolic interactionism covered?	Chicago school covered?	Who is cited?	Iowa school covered?	Who is cited?
Pei, Shiying	No	No	None	No	None
Gui, Wanhong & Su, Yulan	No	No	None	No	None
Liu, Huizhen	No	No	None	No	None
Li, Yixian & Bi, Cheng	No	No	None	No	None
Lu, Jie (eds)	Yes	Yes	Keddie; Woods	No	None
Dong, Zefang	No	No	None	No	None
Wu, Duo & Zhang, Renjie	No	No	None	No	None
Jin, Yiming (eds)	No	No	None	No	None
Fu, Songtao	No	No	None	No	None
Wu, Kangning	Yes	Yes	Cooley; Blumer; Mead; Hargreaves; Keddie; Woods	No	None
Ma, Hemin & Gao, Xuping	No	No	None	No	None
Qian, Pu(eds)	Yes	Yes	Blumer; Mead; James; Thomas; Cooley	No	None
Ma, Hemin	No	No	None	No	None
Qian, Minhui	Yes	Yes	James; Cooley; Mead; Hargreaves	No	None
Yang, Changyong & Zheng, Huai	No	No	None	No	None
Hu, Chunming	No	No	None	No	None
Xie, Weihe	Yes	Yes	Mead; Morris; Goffman; Hargreaves;	No	None